

LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND DIVERSITY IN STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS CODE-SWITCHING: A CASE STUDY OF ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS IN ITALIAN TERTIARY EDUCATION

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Abstract: *By relying on a mixed-method approach consisting of a combination of various quantitative and qualitative techniques of data collection and processing, this article delves into the attitudes towards code-switching (CS), as expressed by students attending English language and English linguistics courses at two Italian universities. Data are retrieved by means of a questionnaire submitted to 297 students in total – all specialising in English as a foreign language (EFL) – and including both closed- and open-ended questions. Based on concepts such as those of conversational loci, or CS functions – namely academic, managerial and social, all well-rooted in the literature – this article also aims at establishing a link between students' attitudes and their respective proficiency level in English according to the CEFR. Despite managing to establish that teacher CS is not felt to have a negative impact on their language skills, the data gathered reveal diverse attitudes, also in relation to the specific functions examined. In the conclusion, possible pedagogical implications of classroom CS are proposed and assessed..*

Key words: *code-switching (CS), English as a foreign language (EFL), academic function, managerial function, social function, proficiency.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In times of globalisation, English is the most widely learned language, with 1.5 billion learners, and has become a compulsory part of national education policy in 142 countries¹. The massive spread of English can be observed at different levels of the education system and in different educational contexts. In the EU alone, 96% of students in upper secondary education were learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in 2019². At the same time, more and more courses are being offered in English as a medium of instruction (EMI) to promote the internationalisation of universities (Macaro, 2020). This means that classrooms in which L2 English coexists with at least another L1 in the repertoire of students and teachers are ubiquitous. Therefore, phenomena related to language contact in the classroom are a relevant and timely subject of study. In particular, classroom code-switching (CS), i.e., switching to the L1 within a single conversation in L2-based classes, is considered one of the most common and inescapable phenomena in language classrooms (Ferguson, 2003; 2009; Temesgen & Hailu, 2022). Although academics and practitioners agree that it is inevitable, their opinions on the use of CS in the classroom are polarised between supporters and detractors. Both factions base their views on teaching theories and research, making the debate heated and requiring further study to gain a better understanding before drawing conclusions (Ferguson, 2009; Temesgen & Hailu, 2022).

On the one hand, proponents of English-only teaching argue that the use of students' L1 (and thus CS) should be avoided completely, as it has a negative impact on learners' language skills (Temesgen & Hailu, 2022). This stance goes back to the direct method, also known as the natural method, which recommends the exclusive use of the target language. This method, which was developed in the 19th century, in contrast with the traditional grammar-translation method, conceptualised language teaching as a pure foreign language environment in which the L1 is avoided at all costs. Since the 1970s the direct method has inspired language teaching worldwide and still affects the current approach of communicative language teaching (Hilgendorf, 2013). Research on teachers'

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perceptions of CS show that they do not use it and even discourage their students from performing it, as they believe CS would negatively impact students' learning in terms of proficiency and inclusion of students with different L1s (Chaudron, 1988).

On the other hand, CS is increasingly regarded as a resource in the language classroom (Flores & Balmeo, 2021). The pedagogical value of the alternation between different languages is supported by both previous and contemporary approaches to foreign language acquisition³. First, CS is rooted in the grammar-translation method, which draws on translating from and into the target language in order to increase students' proficiency (Chaudron, 1988). Although it has been replaced by other, more communicative methods, research shows that it is still a widely used language-teaching and learning technique, which has proved effective in terms of students' proficiency and self-confidence (Aqel, 2013; Milawati, 2019). In addition, research on bilingual instruction argues that monolingual approaches are not supported by scientific evidence and they are also inconsistent with the instructional implications of current theories in the areas of cognitive psychology and applied linguistics (Cummins, 2007). Indeed, recent approaches, such as the translanguaging method, encourage students and teachers to use languages other than the target language to boost learning (Wei, 2018). Since the 1980s, the strategic use of multiple languages has been increasingly implemented in the language classroom: this practice encourages learners to resort to what they have already learned from their L1 in order to clarify ideas and concepts of the L2. Translanguaging differs substantially from CS as it does not seek to establish a boundary between the different languages at play, as apparent in the very notion of CS (García & Wei, 2014). Despite the theoretical and analytical differences of said approaches, the recent spread of translanguaging has contributed to questioning the predominantly L2-based method for teaching languages in favour of a more nuanced attitude towards the use of L1 in the language classroom, where other languages can be used in addition to the L2 for pedagogical purposes.

The under-researched context this contribution centres on is that of Italian tertiary education. The empirical work we present draws on data collected in hybrid and online university courses over the academic year 2022-2023, affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and it aims at contributing to the state of the art on CS in the EFL classroom. As explained in the background and methodology sections, this investigation focuses on CS in EFL classrooms in terms of functions – or “loci”, in the words of Auer (1995:120) – by relating students' attitudes towards CS to their L1 (Italian). This innovative approach provides quantitative and qualitative insights into the pedagogical impact of classroom CS and may help teachers become (more) aware of a potentially useful tool for engaging students.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

As language contact inevitably becomes an increasingly common phenomenon in a globalised world, CS is an extensively studied practice that continues to attract the attention of linguists (Cummins, 2007). Over the years, CS has been addressed from different perspectives, so as to understand where it occurs in a conversation and what functions it fulfils. Auer (1995:120), who carried out a functional analysis, identified several “conversational loci” that favour the transition from one language system to another. In other words, they are micro-contexts in which the switch between the two languages occurs more frequently, namely reported speech, change of participant, side comments, repetitions, mode changes, topic changes, puns and topicalisation. As Auer (1995; 2013) himself pointed out, this list is somewhat problematic as it lacks an adequate theoretical basis and clear definitions, a fact which may lead to confusion and the attendant overlap of conversational structures, linguistic forms and functions. As Auer's conceptual proposal takes little notice of the different statuses of CS or its directionality, it does not seem to be generalisable and cannot therefore lead to a theory of code alternation. Nevertheless, the conversational loci devised by Auer are in fact relevant for a better understanding of the phenomenon of CS, provided that they are considered to be part of an open, non-exhaustive list (Hamam, 2012). All things considered, in line with the scientific literature drawing on Auer's categorisation, in this study it was decided to adopt the term “functions” to refer to “conversational loci”. Though wide-ranging and variously labelled, lists of pedagogical functions continued to be used to analyse classroom CS in later studies, thus showing that CS is an invaluable teaching tool (Bairmani et al., 2022). Other studies have grouped the different functions of CS into broader categories. As a case in point, Temesgen and Hailu's (2022) investigation of the Ethiopian context employed Ferguson's (2003) three-function classification system, namely academic, managerial and social. In line with prior research and considering the advantages, that is its comprehensiveness and ease of use, Ferguson's tripartite nomenclature is also adopted in this study, as detailed in the methodology section.

As Sert (2005) highlights, teachers do not perform CS consciously at all times, as they can be influenced by other factors, such as their beliefs regarding the impact of CS on language learning and their assumptions about students' perceptions of teachers' CS. As emphasised in the introduction, the direct method still influences contemporary pedagogy and thus implicitly discredits CS (Ferguson, 2003). Apart from the ongoing debate on the benefits and drawbacks of classroom CS, teachers appear to show different attitudes and behaviours regarding CS according to their level of professional experience. Taner and Balıkcı (2022) noticed that experienced teachers

tended to be moderate towards the use of L1 in all their practices, while pre-service teachers showed a tendency to support an English-only approach. By contrast, another study carried out by Flores and Balmeo (2021) on pre-service teachers indicates that the younger ones think that CS is needed, especially when teaching students at lower levels. Indeed, teachers' attitudes seem to be context-sensitive (Gallagher, 2020). Luporini and Giacosa (2022) showed that discrepancies can be noticed between EFL and English for specific purposes (ESP) university teachers. The former showed a nuanced attitude towards CS, which was considered as a resource to teach words rather than concepts and to be used with moderation. The latter showed a more decidedly positive attitude towards CS, but stressed other functions, e.g., improving students' self-confidence and involvement, rather than promoting understanding. Regardless of the discrepancies in their results, these studies shed light on the need for further research in classroom CS in order to gain a better understanding of it.

According to a study carried out by Lin (2013), some teachers worry that their opting for CS may be interpreted by students as a sign of lack of proficiency. This is particularly true when contemplating cases involving typologically not-too-distant languages, such as Italian and English, respectively the mother tongue and the target language dealt with in this study. Moreover, as far as genetic affiliation is concerned, it must be remembered that English, despite being traditionally recognised as a Germanic language, is morphologically poor and is characterised by a vocabulary mostly based on (once) loanwords from Latin and (Norman) French (Culpeper & Clapham, 1996:213-215), a fact that makes it more similar to Italian, especially if compared to other, more prototypically Germanic languages such as, for instance, German itself.

However, this perception is challenged by studies on students' attitudes towards their teachers' CS practice in different instructional settings. In a study by Kkese (2020), the participants mainly held positive views about teachers' CS regarding understanding and learning, but not for classroom management. Students in the traditional in-person classroom perceive teacher's CS as an aid in the learning process as well as a resource for ensuring students' comprehension (Kkese, 2020). This is confirmed by research on online and hybrid courses, which shows that students consider CS helpful for various reasons, such as understanding concepts, learning words, familiarising with exam instructions and easing cognitive processes, all falling within Ferguson's category of "academic function". By contrast, much less emphasis is placed on CS as a means of improving interaction, attention or involvement, all items belonging to Ferguson's "managerial function" (Kkese, 2020).

However, students' opinions are far from unanimous. Indeed, attitudes may vary according to their proficiency and, obviously, depending on the language pairs involved in the learning process, i.e., whether they are genetically/typologically close or distant. Research shows that mid- and low-proficient students have favourable attitudes towards the use of CS in the EFL classroom, whereas high-proficient students have negative perceptions. The latter indeed perceive CS as off-putting since it does not help them to improve linguistic competence in English, the language we are focusing on in this study (Hamouda & Aljumah, 2020), although this consideration is probably extendable to other languages. However, students' negative attitudes towards teachers' CS do not necessarily imply a negative assessment of teachers' proficiency. Rather, their attitude is determined by the fact that they do not perceive it as useful to their linguistic progress. By contrast, mid- and low-proficient students see the use of CS as an influential teaching and learning tool to facilitate their comprehension and knowledge of target language grammar and vocabulary, i.e., Ferguson's "academic function". In line with these studies, investigations into teachers' CS show that students' proficiency is the most important motive for teachers' behaviour: teachers switch to L1 especially in case of students' limited competence, presumably to provide them with crucial general information about the course and syllabus. From a learner-centred perspective, teachers should consider CS to better meet their students' needs, especially if they notice that they are not proficient enough to adequately understand the topics dealt with in class (Ferguson, 2009; Jingxia, 2010; Temesgen & Hailu, 2022). As a result, CS is one of the strategies teachers can implement to perform pedagogical functions in order to boost students' proficiency. CS should not be avoided altogether as it does not 'pollute' the English language classroom (nor the English linguistics classroom), provided that most of the interaction between teacher and students takes place in the L2 (Kkese, 2020). On the other hand, teachers should be aware of both the potential benefits and drawbacks of classroom CS, so as to be able to choose the appropriate strategy in classroom interaction (Sert, 2005). This awareness should be incorporated into both the curricula of prospective language teachers and the continuing professional development of in-service teachers (Zainil & Arsyad, 2021).

To summarise, the literature review reveals a wide range of attitudes and perceptions of CS in the classroom. This suggests that there is still much debate over the advantages and disadvantages of switching to students' L1. Furthermore, while CS is an unavoidable aspect of L2 teaching, its pedagogical potential has not yet been sufficiently explored. This emphasises the need for further research aimed at gaining a better understanding of the phenomenon (see Sert, 2005; Ferguson, 2009; Bairmani et al., 2022). Studies on CS in virtual settings, for example, typically analyse CS in online interactions across different platforms such as Skype or WhatsApp (Brunner & Diemer, 2018; Putera et al., 2021). However, formal settings such as virtual and hybrid classes, as well as the role of students' language proficiency level in shaping their attitudes towards CS and its features, have only received

limited attention (Hamouda & Aljumah, 2020). With the goal of contributing to the growing body of research on CS, this article aims to investigate EFL students' perceptions of CS functions by taking into account their respective proficiency level.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-method approach, incorporating quantitative and qualitative procedures of data collection and analysis; in line with previous research, it is believed that such a two-fold approach has the greatest potential to shed light on educational practices and classroom interaction as complex social phenomena (e.g., Creswell, 1999).

3.1. Data collection

The data come from a Google Forms questionnaire distributed at the Universities of Bologna and Turin in the academic year 2021-2022, whose collection period spanned from March to May 2022. Informants are undergraduate EFL students within the English language and linguistics courses offered at these two universities⁴.

The questionnaire aimed at collecting two types of information. The main goal was to investigate the respondents' point of view on the use and functions of CS in the English language and linguistics classes they attended. At the same time, questionnaires were devised to gather both quantitative and qualitative data related to the respondents' linguistic background and profile, which would allow for a better contextualisation of their answers and the attendant statistical observations. Therefore, at the stage of questionnaire design, an opening section was especially devised to collect data on the participants' L1, monolingual/bilingual speaker status, and proficiency level in English from A1 to C2, in compliance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). This section also aimed at gradually introducing respondents to the core part of the questionnaire, including questions on the frequency of use of CS in the classroom and its perceived functions.

Based on findings from previous research (Temesgen & Hailu, 2022), and acknowledging that "switches are very often multifunctional" (Ferguson, 2009:231), Ferguson's (2003:39-45) tripartite functional classification was chosen as a comprehensive framework for questionnaire design and analysis. Ferguson puts forward a taxonomy including the following functional categories:

Academic function: CS for curriculum access, helping students better understand contents/concepts.

Managerial function. CS for classroom management, motivating, encouraging, disciplining students, or signalling changes in the lesson.

Social function: CS for interpersonal relations, improving the affective climate of the classroom and mediating among different identities.

This translates into specific closed questions in the questionnaire, as reported below. Since a related intent was to determine if the type of class (language practice or linguistics: see Note 4) could be said to have an impact on the respondents' attitude towards CS across the various functions, the same questions were repeated in two parallel sub-sections of the questionnaire, with reference first to language practice classes (henceforth just 'language'), then to linguistics classes.

(a) Academic and social function. Multiple-answer, multiple-choice question: "What do you think about English language teachers'/ English linguistics lecturers' CS?" Options relevant for this study: it can/does not facilitate students' understanding; it can/does not facilitate language learning; it creates/does not create a positive atmosphere.

(b) Managerial function. Yes/No question: "In your opinion, when your English language teachers/ English linguistics lecturers code-switch, does it help you pay more attention and feel more involved?"

Furthermore, in order to better understand the reasons underlying a positive attitude towards CS, question (b) was followed by an open-ended question, reserved for students who had answered the previous one positively:

(c) Open-ended question: "If you answered yes to the previous question, could you explain in your own words how code-switching helps you in English language classes/ English linguistics lectures? (You can answer either in English or in Italian)".

3.2. Statistical analysis of responses

The questionnaire originally included 32 questions. For the purposes of this study, it was decided to focus on questions (a), (b) and (c) above. Both the quantitative and the qualitative data are considered in relation to the respondents' declared CEFR level, working on data triangulation at different levels, as detailed below⁵.

Quantitative data resulting from questions (a) and (b) were first analysed through descriptive statistics; the resulting assumptions were further tested through inferential statistical methods. The data coming from Google Forms in .xls format were first processed automatically with an ad hoc Python script, which extracted the responses to the questions examined in this study from the original file. In order to be able to model question (a) statistically, the three option pairs reported above ('facilitates understanding', 'facilitates learning', 'creates a positive atmosphere') were turned into binary variables, i.e., 0/1, where 0 means 'selection of the negative option or no selection' and 1 means 'selection of the positive option'. For instance, a respondent who flagged "it can facilitate student understanding" and "it can facilitate language learning" with reference to language teachers' CS is represented in our matrix as 1 for understanding, 1 for learning and 0 for positive atmosphere with reference to language classes. Participants who had given inconsistent answers or had left one or more of our focus questions blank (26 out of 297), were automatically filtered out, so as to obtain balanced and comparable numbers of responses for each question. This decision was made after performing a cost-benefit analysis: on the one hand, it was assumed that the low number of excluded questionnaires would not significantly affect the overall results; on the other, working on different response totals would cause problems in computing statistics and comparing results for different questions. The resulting file, containing all the participants who provided complete answers, divided by CEFR level, was used to produce the graphs discussed in the following section and for statistical inferences. From this perspective, it was verified whether the distribution of 0/1 answers to the focus questions could be said to significantly differ depending on the respondent's proficiency. Considering the nature of the variables at play (an ordinal independent variable – the CEFR level – and a binary dependent variable – 0/1), binary logistic regression, computed through another ad hoc Python script, was applied⁶.

As for the qualitative analysis, this was performed by grouping answers to question (c) by the CEFR level of the respondent, hence creating separate text files which were used to produce word clouds through an online generator⁷.

4. DISCUSSION

A total of 297 students answered the questionnaire, for the most part monolingual native Italian speakers (83.7%). There were also a few bilingual students (16.3%), but most indicated Italian as L1. The population of respondents is almost equally divided among the three years of Italian undergraduate courses: 41.2% first year, 31% second year, 27.9% third year. However, for the purposes of this study, the more relevant factor is the CEFR level declared by the respondents, which can be high also in the case of first year students, since EFL teaching starts with primary education in the Italian educational system.

After the filtering procedure described above, the number of questionnaires worth considering for analysis decreases from 297 to 271. Within these, the majority of respondents declares a level falling between B2 – independent user, higher threshold (133 students, 49.1%) – and C1 – proficient user, lower threshold (89 students, 32.8%). There is an imbalanced distribution of respondents across the CEFR scale concerning the other levels: A1 is not at all represented (just one respondent in the original data, whose questionnaire was filtered out); A2 and C2 are under-represented, with 7 students each (2.6%); B1, with 35 respondents, accounts for 12.9%. While this needs to be taken into account when considering the results displayed below, it must be noted that creating balanced groups would have required a different data collection procedure. However, a different procedure would not have matched the original research aims, which were rather oriented towards 'taking a snapshot' of the heterogeneous composition of the undergraduate student cohorts in the two universities. This issue might be considered at a later stage as a possible development of this study.

4.1. Academic function

To investigate the respondents' attitude towards CS as a tool for curriculum access, analysis focuses on question (a), identifying two specific aspects of the academic function that are highlighted by a sub-set of the available options: understanding and learning.

Considering the relationship between CS and understanding, the students who selected the positive option 'it can facilitate student understanding' are taken into account, as opposed to those who selected the negative option 'it does not facilitate student understanding' or did not select any option related to this aspect. The following stacked bar charts show the results as percentages with reference, respectively, to the language classes (Figure 1) and to the linguistics classes (Figure 2). Raw numbers and percentage values are provided in Table 1.

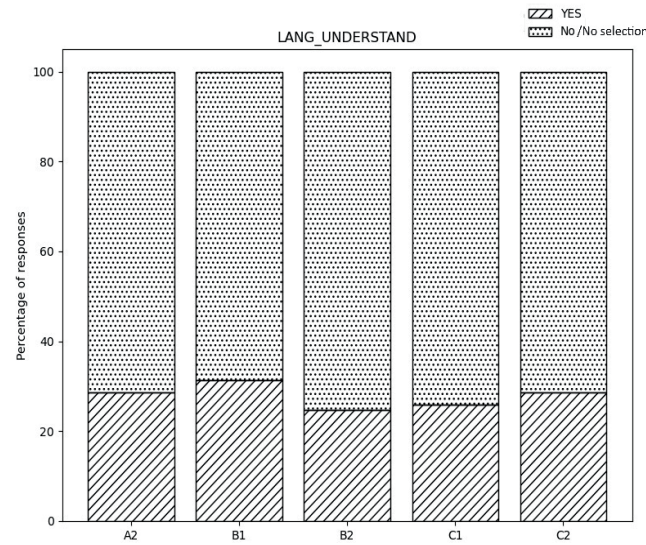


Figure 1. CS and understanding in language classes.

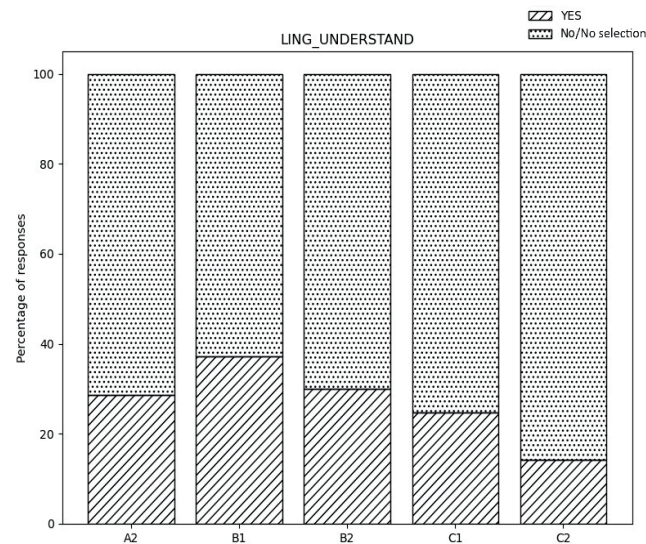


Figure 2. CS and understanding in linguistics classes.

Table 1. CS and understanding: raw number of selections for each option and percentage values.

	LANGUAGE		LINGUISTICS	
	CS can facilitate understanding (YES)	CS does not facilitate understanding/ no selection	CS can facilitate understanding (YES)	CS does not facilitate understanding/ no selection
A2	2 (28.57%)	5 (71.43%)	2 (28.57%)	5 (71.43%)
B1	11 (31.43%)	24 (68.57%)	13 (37.14%)	22 (62.86%)
B2	33 (24.81%)	100 (75.19%)	40 (30.08%)	93 (69.92%)
C1	23 (25.84%)	66 (74.16%)	22 (24.72%)	67 (75.28%)
C2	2 (28.57%)	5 (71.43%)	1 (14.29%)	6 (85.71%)

Both Figures 1 and 2 show an across-the-board minority of explicit positive selections on the part of students. With reference to language classes (Figure 1), the initial hypothesis was that the selections of the positive option would steadily decrease from A2 to C2. However, data do not return such a linear trend. In fact, from A2 to B1,

and again from B2 to C2, a slight increase in the choice of the positive option can be observed. This may be due to the differences between the groups in terms of respondent numbers. In fact, within the B1-B2-C1 section of the scale (the groups with the highest number of respondents), there is a perceptible decrease in the percentage of positive selections from B1 to B2 (a key juncture in the CEFR framework, where students move from understanding the main points of a standard/familiar input to understanding the main points of a complex text). Conversely, the answers provided by B2 and C1 students are virtually aligned.

As for linguistics classes (Figure 2), the theoretical and metalinguistic nature of these lessons would potentially make them more challenging also for advanced students. Indeed, in this case, we had hypothesised a higher incidence of the positive option at all levels. However, this was not confirmed, as the percentage of positive selections remains decidedly below 50% everywhere. A more linear trend can be found between B1 and C1 respondents, with a constant decrease in the explicit expression of a positive attitude. Still, the binary logit test confirms that the distribution of the positive and negative/null selections is not significantly different depending on the proficiency level of students ($p > 0.05$ for all levels).

Now, to analyse the relationship between CS and learning, attention is paid to the students who selected the positive option 'it can facilitate language learning', as opposed to those who selected the negative option 'it does not facilitate language learning' or did not select any option related to this aspect. Results for the two types of classes, reported in Table 2, are visually represented in Figures 3 and 4.

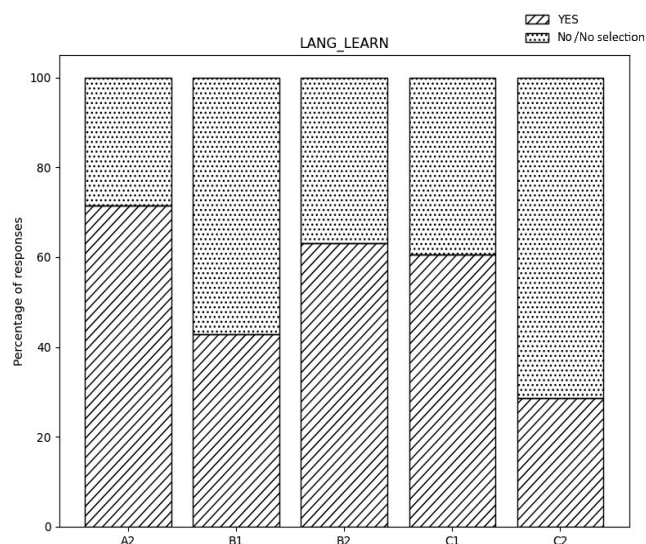


Figure 3. CS and learning in language classes.

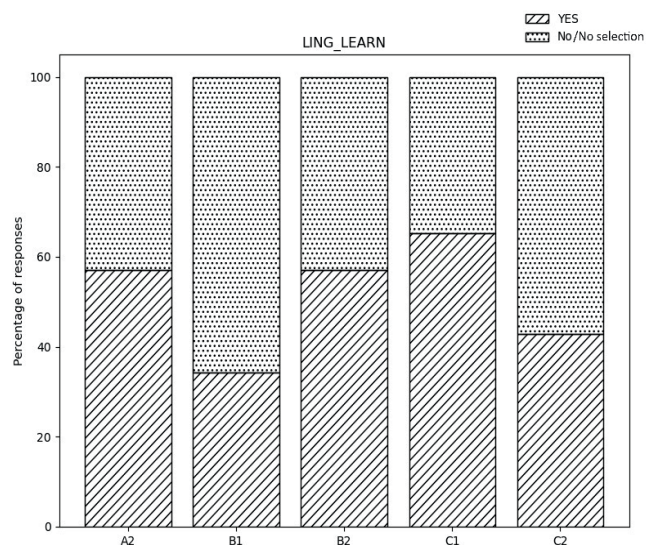


Figure 4. CS and learning in linguistics classes.

Table 2. CS and learning: raw number of selections for each option and percentage values.

	LANGUAGE		LINGUISTICS	
	CS can facilitate language learning (YES)	CS does not facilitate language learning/ no selection	CS can facilitate language learning (YES)	CS does not facilitate language learning/ no selection
A2	5 (71.43%)	2 (28.57%)	4 (57.14%)	3 (42.86%)
B1	15 (42.86%)	20 (57.14%)	12 (34.29%)	23 (65.71%)
B2	84 (63.16%)	49 (36.84%)	76 (57.14%)	57 (42.86%)
C1	54 (60.67%)	35 (39.33%)	58 (65.17%)	31 (34.83%)
C2	2 (28.57%)	5 (71.43%)	3 (42.86%)	4 (57.14%)

Firstly, in comparison with understanding, there is an overall increase in the percentage of positive selections. Indeed, within the A2, B2 and C1 groups, most respondents ticked the positive option, with reference to both types of classes. The percentage values of the positive selections are lower for linguistics within the A2-B2 range (Table 2), possibly because these students tend to better perceive this function in the context of more practical and skill-oriented language classes. Conversely, C1 students may be more inclined to acknowledge the learning opportunities offered by a contrastive (L1/L2) analytical approach to the analysis of texts, or to the acquisition of specific terminology. In fact, the hypothesis that more advanced students would be less likely to perceive this positive function of CS is not confirmed by the data. If, on the one hand, the percentage of positive answers decreases from A2 to B1, on the other, the opposite trend can be noticed from B1 to C1, for both language and linguistics. Respondents at the B1 and C2 levels – once again, despite their different stages of progression within the CEFR framework – emerge as the least convinced of the capacity of CS to facilitate language learning. It may be that B2 and C1 students, who generally possess an already wide vocabulary and master even complex texts, do not find CS particularly useful for understanding, while they appreciate a contrastive approach that can highlight, for example, different nuances of meaning between L1 and L2 in the use of certain words or expressions (learning). Conversely, B1 and C2 students may feel a more pressing need to be fully immersed in the L2, for different reasons (e.g., the former to enrich their vocabulary; the latter to fine-tune an already mastery-level knowledge). The binary logit test again confirms that the distribution of the positive and negative/null answers is not significantly influenced by the proficiency level ($p > 0.05$ for all levels).

4.2. Social function

To investigate the respondents' attitude towards CS as a tool to enhance interpersonal relations, question (a) should be examined again, this time considering the students who selected the positive option 'it creates a positive atmosphere', as opposed to those who selected the negative option 'it does not create a positive atmosphere' or did not select any option related to this aspect. Data provided in Table 3 are depicted in Figures 5 and 6.

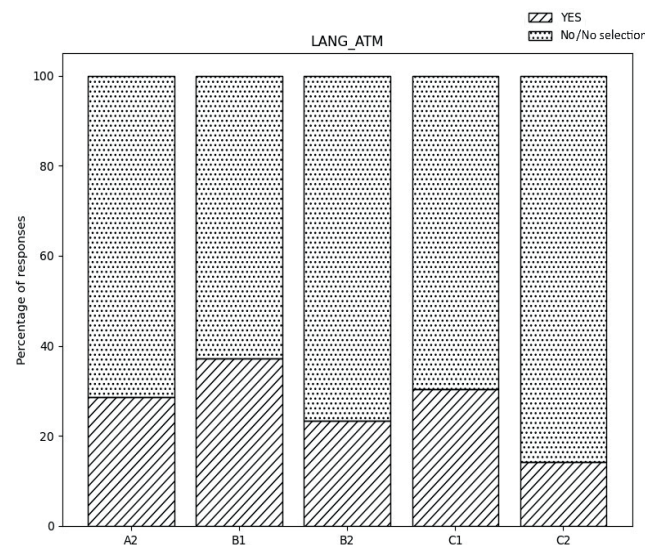


Figure 5. CS and classroom atmosphere in language classes.

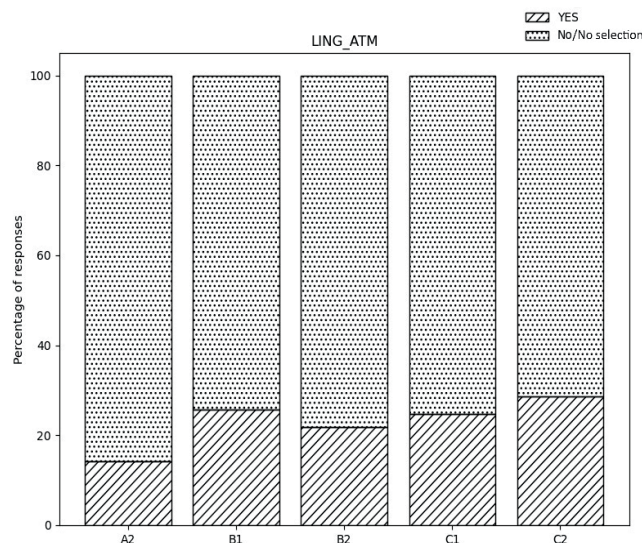


Figure 6. CS and classroom atmosphere in linguistics classes.

Table 3. CS and classroom atmosphere: raw number of selections for each option and percentage values.

LANGUAGE	LINGUISTICS			
	CS creates a positive atmosphere (YES)	CS does not create a positive atmosphere/ no selection	CS creates a positive atmosphere (YES)	CS does not create a positive atmosphere/ no selection
A2	2 (28.57%)	5 (71.43%)	1 (14.29%)	6 (85.71%)
B1	13 (37.14%)	22 (62.86%)	9 (25.71%)	26 (74.29%)
B2	31 (23.31%)	102 (76.69%)	29 (21.80%)	104 (78.20%)
C1	27 (30.34%)	62 (69.66%)	22 (24.72%)	67 (75.28%)
C2	1 (14.29%)	6 (85.71%)	2 (28.57%)	5 (71.43%)

The percentage of explicitly positive selections dramatically decreases at all levels, falling decidedly below 50%. Once again, the CEFR level does not significantly influence the selection (binary logit test results: $p > 0.05$ for all levels). Overall, students seem to be less willing to acknowledge the social function of CS in the case of linguistics classes. Presumably, the key to explaining these data lies in the specific evaluative meanings attached to the expression 'positive atmosphere' in the context of Italian education. Possibly, as far as our student sample is concerned, a positive atmosphere stems from a situation in which all the participants are fully immersed in the foreign language they are studying, notwithstanding their proficiency level. In our case, English thus becomes a fitting tool to foster interpersonal relationships and an inclusive device that, thanks to its 'extrinsic' status, can effectively mediate among different identities. This stance may be related to the cultural context, particularly within the organisation of the Italian educational system in general and, more specifically, of EFL classes, also before university. Some degree of influence from the peculiar situational circumstances under which data were collected (hybrid/remote teaching) cannot be excluded. As for the differences between language and linguistics in the expression of a positive social function of CS, it may be that our students expect a 'full immersion' into English especially within classes that aim at developing a critical/metalinguistic awareness.

4.3. Managerial function

With reference to CS for classroom management, responses to questions (b) and (c) are considered. As for question (b), differently from the one previously discussed, the original questionnaire had already foreseen a binary answer. Therefore, in this case, the number of selections of positive answers is contrasted with the number of selections of negative ones for all CEFR levels. Results, detailed in Table 4, are represented graphically in Figures 7 and 8.

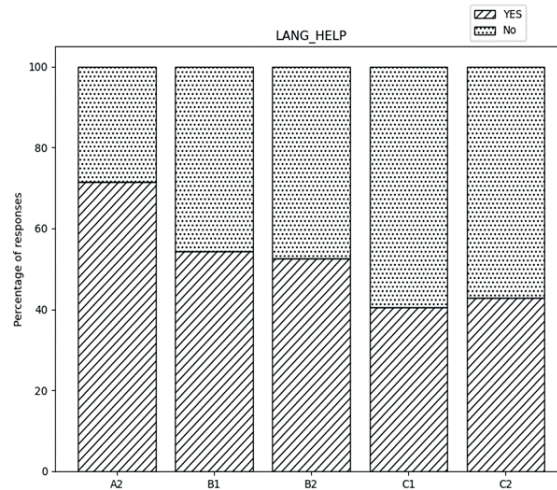


Figure 7. CS and classroom management in language classes.

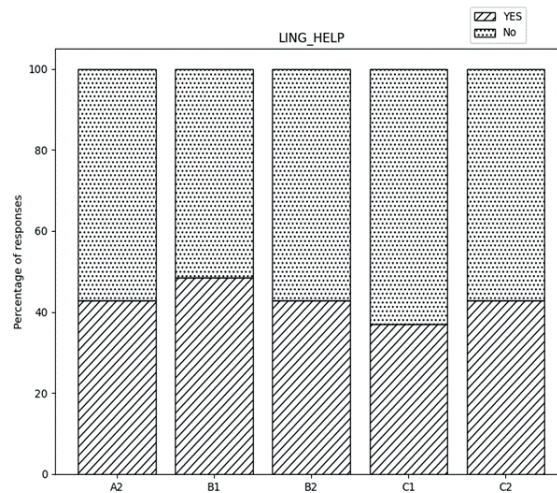


Figure 8. CS and classroom management in linguistics classes.

Table 4. CS and classroom management: raw number of YES vs. NO answers and percentage values.

	LANGUAGE		LINGUISTICS	
	CS helps pay more attention/feel more involved (YES)	CS does not help pay more attention/feel more involved (NO)	CS helps pay more attention/feel more involved (YES)	CS does not help pay more attention/feel more involved (NO)
A2	5 (71.43%)	2 (28.57%)	3 (42.86%)	4 (57.14%)
B1	19 (54.29%)	16 (45.71%)	17 (48.57%)	18 (51.43%)
B2	70 (52.63%)	63 (47.37%)	57 (42.86%)	76 (57.14%)
C1	36 (40.45%)	53 (59.55%)	33 (37.08%)	56 (62.92%)
C2	3 (42.86%)	4 (57.14%)	3 (42.86%)	4 (57.14%)

In this case, possibly because students were required to make a straightforward choice between yes and no, it seems easier to identify common trends. According to the binary logit test, the variable 'proficiency' is not likely to have any influence on the distribution of positive and negative answers in either type of class (here too, $p > 0.05$ for all levels). However, with reference to language classes (Figure 7), the percentage of positive selections decreases constantly as the CEFR level increases, with C1 and C2 students being essentially aligned; as for the linguistics classes (Figure 8), the same trend is exhibited by the most numerous groups (B1, B2, C1). In other words, although

the divide between 'yes' and 'no' does not per se allow for predicting the selection of one variable depending on the respondent's proficiency, judging from the descriptive data above, students with a lower level of proficiency are more willing to acknowledge a positive managerial function of CS than more advanced ones. The latter group supposedly find it less challenging to stay focused and take part in the lesson (be it practical or theoretical, in-person or online), even when this is entirely carried out in English.

Question (c) centres on the examination of qualitative data. This question was explicitly related to the previous one (b) – and thus to the managerial function – even though respondents were free to highlight any other specific aspect or function of CS. Reflecting on their most frequent lexical choices might therefore provide additional insights into their attitude and perceptions, which do not emerge in the same way from the analysis of quantitative data. Figure 9 shows word clouds where the most frequent lexical words used by respondents are given prominence. The discussion is limited to the B1, B2 and C1 groups for reasons of space and also because the other two included just 7 students, not all of whom left a comment, making their datasets too small (<100 words) to be analysed in these terms.

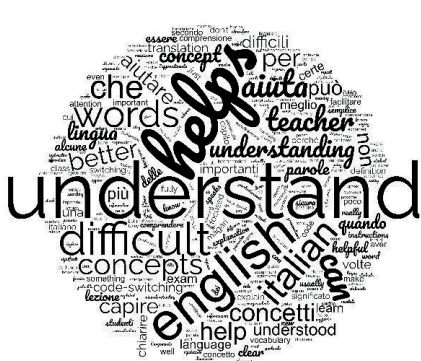
B1 respondents – language (189 words)



B1 respondents – linguistics (259 words)



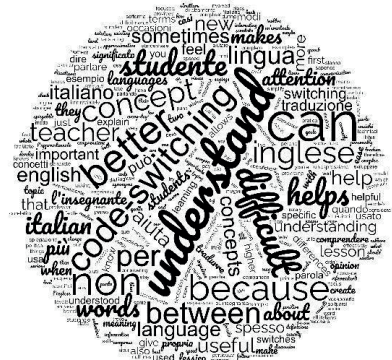
B2 respondents – language (917 words)



B2 respondents – linguistics (299 words)



C1 respondents – language (839 words)



C1 respondents – linguistics (426 words)



Figure 9. Word clouds for B1, B2 and C1 respondents' answers to question (c).

Firstly, the figure shows that instances of CS can be found in all datasets: Italian words appear in each of the word clouds (e.g., “*aiuta*” – helps; “*concetti*” – concepts). While the choice of the Italian language was sanctioned by the question text (“You can answer either in English or in Italian” – an option foreseen in order to maximise participation), it is interesting that students with different proficiency levels chose to use their L1. Shifting the focus from the structure to the content level, it is apparent that the verb “understand” and its Italian equivalent, “*capire*”, figure prominently in all word clouds. This fact establishes a connection with a specific aspect of the academic function, despite the fact that this question was explicitly linked to the one on the managerial function. Two possible explanations for this may be envisaged, both capable of shedding light on the students’ attitude towards CS as a complex phenomenon. Perhaps ‘paying more attention and feeling more involved’, from question (b), for these respondents is inextricably linked to ‘understanding’. Alternatively, the use of the verb ‘help’ in question (c), being rather generic, may have led these students to think of what, in their minds, is the prototypical function of CS – enhancing understanding. In both cases, it may be hypothesised that, for students, the functions of CS tend to overlap and are not easily considered separately – an assumption that could help explain the partially contrasting quantitative data obtained. CS does not just help understand “words”, “*parole*” – more prominent only within the B1/language word cloud – but also, most importantly, “concepts”.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS ON PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

This mixed-method study refers to two different types of English language teaching, language- and content-oriented (linguistics), which provides a comprehensive understanding of English courses at tertiary level. It offered insights into how students with different proficiency levels perceive the three functions of teacher CS (academic, social, managerial). Although the investigation is limited to two universities and two types of courses, it still manages to provide reliable data collected from anonymous responses given by students relating to different teachers. The triangulation of data showed that classroom CS does not make a relevant difference from the student’s point of view in terms of functions, language proficiency levels and the type of class considered (content- or language-oriented). This result seems to support the detractors of the use of CS in the classroom. However, based on the achieved outcomes, it seems that taking a definitive stance on the debate is not feasible. Instead, educators and practitioners may find it more beneficial to embrace a nuanced perspective on the pedagogical implications of CS functions for English language learners.

In existing studies, CS was reportedly appreciated by mid- or low-proficient students as a means of clarification (Hamouda & Aljumah, 2020). In turn, teachers would purposefully code-switch as a strategy to boost students’ understanding (and learning) (Kkese, 2020). In line with previous research on CS, it was decided to label this aspect academic function. The results have shown that there is no complete agreement on the effectiveness of CS in this respect. Students were asked to consider two features: understanding and learning. It is relevant that in both language- and content-oriented courses a minority of students perceive CS as helpful in enhancing their understanding. This stance is confirmed also if students’ proficiency levels are referred to. However, it contradicts one of the main advantages for teacher CS, namely the switch to L1 in order to explain (and often translate) an L2 word or expression. It may indicate that students internalised a common communication strategy that the teachers suggested during language classes: if they do not know the exact word they need, students are told to avoid using the L1 term and to look for L2 alternatives, such as hypernyms (e.g., ‘doctor’ instead of ‘surgeon’), synonyms (e.g., ‘very little’ instead of ‘tiny’) and periphrases⁹. As students are required to be able to provide explanations by means of L2 resources without translating concepts into their L1, it is possible that they stigmatise their teachers’ switch to L1 when they need to explain or translate an unclear expression. It is equally possible that students find it difficult to switch from one language to another while focusing on the target language. As a caveat, since our initial aim – before taking stock of the data – was to focus on the expression of *positive* attitudes towards CS, the questionnaire designed for this study deliberately excluded open questions aimed at investigating the students’ reasons for *not* appreciating CS with reference to understanding. However, the students’ scarce explicit appreciation of CS in this respect allows scholars to identify it as a worthwhile topic for future research. Indeed, the qualitative data displayed in Figure 9 shed light on the students’ attitude towards CS as a complex phenomenon.

All things considered, it is relevant that students seem to appreciate CS when it fosters learning. Data show that this is true in both language and linguistics courses and across different proficiency levels. However, these findings raise further questions. For instance, it is unclear whether students were aware of the difference between “understanding” and “learning”. It is possible that respondents interpreted the latter term more broadly, as referring to the whole process of acquiring knowledge, while the former term may have been perceived as more focused on a specific aspect (i.e., the meaning of an unknown word). Moreover, qualitative data have shown that it is not always easy for students to reflect on CS in terms of functions. For example, in their answers to the open-ended question, our respondents tended to merge an aspect that should be considered managerial – ‘paying more attention and feeling more involved’, from question (b) – with one that should be classified as academic, i.e., understanding. To gain more insight, future studies could incorporate semi-guided interviews to help students better explain their point of view. In light of the present findings, it seems that teachers should avoid using CS as a

shortcut to understanding while leveraging it to facilitate learning. At the same time, students seem to believe that teachers should switch between languages whenever this practice can enhance the learning process. However, the lack of detailed data on how students interpret the difference between understanding and learning makes it difficult to draw definitive conclusions about the effectiveness of CS as an academic tool.

A similar conclusion may be drawn concerning the managerial function of teacher CS. As for language-oriented courses, it was found that slightly less than half of the sample (49% vs. 51%) finds the use of CS by teachers useful in keeping students focused and engaged. This percentage decreases in content-oriented courses, where even fewer students acknowledge the managerial function of teacher CS. However, this study also revealed that the perceived effectiveness of CS decreases for more proficient students, indicating that it may not be an effective tool for the implementation of the managerial function in such cases. It is important to note that this study was conducted on students specialising in EFL, where minimum entry-level requirements make the classes more homogenous (approximately 80% of respondents had a B2-C1 proficiency level). On the other hand, EFL classes within other university courses are more likely to be heterogeneous. In fact, students may have reached different proficiency levels at the end of upper secondary school, even though English is widely taught throughout the education system. Therefore, these findings cannot be generalised *tout court* to other contexts, where students might be less proficient and motivated in language learning than the ones investigated. Nevertheless, it is relevant that CS is perceived as useful at lower proficiency levels, even though in this peculiar context findings are not statistically significant. Apart from confirming the results of previous studies, our deductions indicate that CS could perform the managerial function effectively in mixed-ability classes, likely the most common context in virtually all foreign language acquisition settings – not necessarily involving only EFL learning.

Interestingly, CS is perceived as a more effective managerial tool in language-focused classes, where the goal of full immersion in the target language may be more relevant. One possible explanation for this is that the respondents attended hybrid and online classes, which can be a challenging context for interaction, as shown in literature on the recent pandemic, when classes shifted online (Luporini, 2020). In language courses, where interaction plays a fundamental role, students might have found it more challenging to stay focused in an online and hybrid environment compared to a traditional class. As a result, there might have been an increased need for class management. Thus, CS could have played a more relevant role as a tool to help students stay focused in language courses, compared to content-oriented classes. Conversely, students in content-based courses were more accustomed to teacher-centred lectures, which made it easier for them to maintain their concentration and required less classroom management. Given the possibility of more online and hybrid courses in future teaching scenarios, it would be interesting to explore this aspect further, to see how useful CS could be in managing classes in online and hybrid contexts, where interaction is crucial but challenging.

Finally, it was found that only a small percentage of students from both courses approved of the teacher's use of L1 to improve the overall class atmosphere. This was especially true for content-based classes, usually much larger, where there were fewer opportunities for interaction between teachers and students. Teachers typically deliver lectures to a large audience while showing slides, which makes interaction less significant. It is worthy of mention that even fewer respondents from language classes appreciated CS for its social function, despite the fact that this type of classes, focusing on language proper, might provide a more favourable context for teacher-student exchange. In such classes, teachers would use visuals and prompts from a textbook to activate students and encourage participation. Additionally, teachers would generally create a safe and informal environment to help students feel at ease while speaking in a foreign language. However, this study revealed that there was no significant difference between using CS in language and linguistics classes to improve the general classroom atmosphere. It is worth noting that these results were obtained from hybrid and online classes, which are challenging environments for interaction and require more effort from teachers to establish human contact through a screen and compensate for the lack of proximity. Furthermore, the impact of computer- and video-mediated communication might have flattened the differences between the two types of contexts. Therefore, further studies would be needed to investigate the impact of CS in large vs. small classes and in online vs. in-person contexts, so as to help teachers make full use of CS from this perspective.

In conclusion, it is believed that this study contributes to the debate on classroom CS by showing that it cannot simply be dismissed as ineffective, especially regarding academic, social and managerial functions. The investigation carried out refutes the common argument against, namely that CS negatively impacts students' language skills by hindering their full immersion in the target language. Analysis of the data from our questionnaire leads us to postulate that students do not consider CS as negative *tout court*, but rather express diverse attitudes, also depending on different perceived functions, which were highlighted by keywords like 'understanding', 'learning' and 'atmosphere' in our questions (see Section 3.1). Students seem to endorse CS particularly as a means of increasing learning. This leads to the question of whether CS may be inherently ineffective with reference to the other functions, or whether teachers lack the necessary awareness/training, or have personal beliefs that prevent them from implementing effective CS practices. Undoubtedly, further research is required to clarify this question. For instance, micro-analysis of exchanges in English language and English linguistics courses taught by different

teachers could be combined with questionnaires or interviews intended to investigate how effectively CS was used and how it was evaluated by learners. Another possible research path could take into consideration the impact of teacher CS in different parts of the lesson, namely the beginning, the core and the end. A sociolinguistic approach would clarify whether student perception is influenced by the fact that a teacher is a native English speaker or not. In addition, it would be interesting to study possible differences in student perceptions of contexts other than Italy. Furthermore, CS should be included in teacher training curricula in order to provide teachers themselves with an effective and truly empowering multifunctional tool.

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AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION

Even if the paper is the product of continuous collaboration among the authors, Antonella Luporini is responsible for Sections 3.2 and 4, Antonella Giacosa for Sections 3.1 and 5, Cristiano Furiassi for Sections 1 and 2.

ENDNOTES

¹ <https://www.dotefl.com/english-language-statistics/>

² <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/ddn-20220923-1>

³ In the literature, the label “foreign language acquisition”, conventionally abbreviated as FLA, is the most widely applied to “the learning of a foreign language through formal instruction, for example in the classroom” (Winford, 2003:208-209).

⁴ These courses include two inseparable components: practical language classes, developing the traditional four skills (reading, listening, writing, speaking), usually taught by native English speakers, and linguistics classes, having a more theoretical and metalinguistic orientation, taught in English, usually by non-native speakers.

⁵ Data triangulation is intended as “using the same approach for different sets of data in order to verify or falsify generalisable trends detected in one data set” (Oppermann, 2000:142).

⁶ All the data and the Python scripts are publicly available at <https://github.com/LaboratorioSperimentale/Code-switching-Analysis>.

⁷ <https://www.wordclouds.com/>.

⁸ <https://learnenglishteens.britishcouncil.org/exams/speaking-exams/when-you-dont-know-exact-word>.

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